

## There's Prayer, Then There's *Prayer*

Psalm 28

Studies in the Psalms #29

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I WANT to begin with Jesus this morning. Don't forget that he taught his disciples from all the Old Testament, including the Psalms, that he would die and rise (Luke 24:44-46). We see that here. Verses 1-5 is his prayer in suffering and dying and verses 6-9 is his prayer in rising. Jesus cried out to the Father, pleading that he would not forsake him as his Son in death as he does the wicked (vv. 1-5). But ultimately he willingly underwent the experience of the Father's silence and the Father's forsaking him to death. As Jesus prayed, "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). And because he was a righteous sacrifice he was heard. In resurrection he could say, **Blessed be the LORD!** In resurrection he could say, **For he has heard the voice of my pleas for mercy** (v. 6). And now the prayer of verse 9 is ours, that God would **save us, bless us, be [our] shepherd, and carry [us] forever.** Amen?

We often see Jesus in the Gospels praying alone. We say to ourselves, "There's prayer, then there's *prayer*." We pray, but Jesus *really* prayed. But what was he praying in those solitary moments? He was praying the Psalms!

He was praying Psalm 28. And yes, Jesus' prayers as the sinless Savior are qualitatively different than ours, but since he unites us to himself by faith and since he anoints us with the Holy Spirit, we too can enter into this kind of impactful, pleasing to God, and true prayer.

### **Prayer that Recognizes God Hears**

Psalm 28 makes a first point that is so obvious we obviously miss it.

We live right next to the world's largest ocean. We drive along and enjoy it or look at how big the waves are, but we're oblivious to how monumental it really is. And right in front of us in this Psalm is an obvious but huge point: *true prayer is prayer that recognizes God hears.*

Look at verse 1: **To you, O LORD, I call.** And look at verse 2: **Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy.** We can call upon the Lord because the Lord hears. And this is brought out in an interesting way here. Verse 1 continues: **my rock, be not deaf to me, lest, if you be silent to me, I become like those who go down to the pit.** What does God being like a rock have to do with his listening to David's prayer? What does the image of a rock make us think like? It makes us think of something that is strong, right? But it seems so passive. Don't we say, "I slept like a rock?" A rock doesn't seem to fit what the rest of the verse is saying. Not if by rock David means merely strength.

What else does the image of God as a rock communicate? In Exodus 17 Moses strikes the rock and water flows out. The Lord identified himself as the rock and even Paul says the rock was Christ. God the rock was not a passive and static God but he was life-giving.<sup>1</sup> We pray to God the Father because his Son, Jesus Christ, is alive from the dead, and because he hears us in the dynamic relationship he has with us in the fellowship of the Spirit.

And that dynamism of relationship through prayer is expressed verbally in prayer—**Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy, when I cry to you for help**—and tangibly **when I lift up (*nasa'*) my hands toward your most holy sanctuary** (v. 2). That word **most holy sanctuary** is speaking of the innermost shrine or Holy of Holies. Now for us as Reformed people living among the flood of modern American Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Movement, lifting up of hands is absolutely taboo. I think I mentioned that when Karajean and I were in Costa Rica two summers ago we worshipped at a Pentecostal church full of white-haired retirees who were chatting about everything under the sun but as soon as the music started everyone's hands went up as an auto response. We all can think of bad examples. But all that doesn't negate that the lifting of hands is a *biblical*

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<sup>1</sup> On this, see Motyer, 70.

posture of prayer. It expresses many things. In Psalm 63:4 it seems to be a posture of reaching out to embrace God himself. In Exodus 17:9 it is a posture of Moses as leader calling down God's power on his people, like a benediction. Here in Psalm 28 it seems like a posture of coming to God empty-handed and seeking his help. What can be more biblical than that?

And David is saying if he doesn't hear me **I become like those who go down to the pit**, meaning, we will be like those whom God consigned to death.<sup>2</sup> And so he cries out in verses 3-5 in the context of those who do not believe because he does believe. And he knows God hears.

### **Prayer that Remembers God's Promises**

But how do we know God hears us in prayer? Children, how do you know that your mom or dad will hear you when you talk to them? And I know that dad sometimes spaces out and doesn't hear! You know he listens because he's dad, right? You know mom listens because that's what mom's do. Plus they have ears. But how do we know God hears us? Well, he's our Heavenly Father and just like our parents listen God listens, right? But there's more here. We know God hears us because he has promised to hear us in his Word. *True prayer is prayer that remembers God's promises.*

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<sup>2</sup> Motyer, 70.

Let me explain this from one verse and then make one application of it. Look again at verse 2: **Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy, when I cry to you for help.** The language of **mercy** and **help** is covenant language. When God makes a covenant with his people all through Scripture, he promises to be for them today, tomorrow, and in the future because he was for them in the past. And so we read over and over in the Old Testament of the “steadfast love” of the Lord, meaning, his faithfulness to his covenant promises. And David is now crying out for that faithfulness of the Lord because he is unfaithful and everyone else around him is unfaithful. David is crying out like we do in the hymn:

Abide with me: fast falls the eventide;  
the darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide.  
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,  
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Now, this means that for you and me to pray today for tomorrow by remembering God’s promises in the past we have to actually *know* the promises! We read through the Word here on the Lord’s Day so that as a congregation we hear of God’s promises. But are you reading the Word, brothers and sisters, throughout the week? Read it! Read it as an individual, read it as a couple, read it as families. There’s a reason we as Christians have

been known as “the people of the book” throughout the centuries. Let’s know forget what the book says! J.C. Ryle said it like this: “The Bible in the pulpit must never supersede the Bible at home.”<sup>3</sup>

## **Prayer that Responds in God’s Praises**

And as we recognize that God hears our prayers because we remember his many promises to hear *and* to answer, we also see here that *true prayer is prayer that responds in God’s praises*. Notice how David shifts from praying to the hearing God in verses 1-5 to praise for the answering God in verses 6–9: **Blessed (*barak*) be the LORD! For he has heard the voice of my pleas for mercy (v. 6)**. We so often compile our list of prayer requests but how often do we give praise for prayers answered? The Holy Spirit here is encouraging us through David’s example never to forget to give praise for the answers! Again we see that in verse 7: **The LORD is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts, and I am helped**. Isn’t that what the early part of the Psalm was asking for—help? And now that he’s been helped David says **my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him**.

What’s interesting here at the end is verse 8. As David is praying and then praising he is also teaching: **The LORD is the strength of his people;**

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<sup>3</sup> *Holiness* (London: William Hunt and Company, 1879), 431.

**he is the saving refuge of his anointed** (v. 8). This is a part of what Paul says to us in Colossians 3, that when we sing and pray the Word to God in thankfulness we're also "teaching and admonishing one another" (Col. 3:16). So when we pray set prayers together or when we sing, say it and sing it aloud with faith because there is someone nearby who needs to hear your voice testifying to them that God's truth is for them!

There's a final prayer in verse 9. As we say individually, ***blessed*** (*barak*) **be the LORD** in verse 6, we pray for the Lord to bless us corporately: **Oh, save your people and *bless* (*barak*) your heritage!** And as we pray individually, **hear the voice of my pleas for mercy, when I cry to you for help, when I *lift up* (*nasa'*) my hands toward your most holy sanctuary** in verse 2, we pray for the whole church: **Be their shepherd and *carry* (*nasa'*) them forever.**

And isn't this who Jesus is for us? "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11). We recognize that our shepherd hears our bleating prayers because he knows us and we know him. We remember he promises to answer our bleating prayers in our need when the wolves approach. We respond in praise when he hears. Amen.